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ABSTRACT

As a teacher it is important to write frequently and in many forms. A writing teacher finds things to write about in his teaching. The angle of intent is sometimes more important than the facts presented. The flow of writing is different than the flow of speaking. Speaking is more spontaneous where writing is more constructed. Writing can be a therapy and a recreation. A teacher who writes is always reflecting on his or her teaching. Writing helps oral communication, and oral communication provides experience for teachers to write about. Writing helps friendship; collegial relationships are much enriched if colleagues read and comment on each others writing. Writing can be a weapon, but write to build bridges and not to tear them down. In negative writing, get the facts straight and do not exaggerate. The greatest beneficiary of the writerly teacher is the student. A writer has power because a writer is feared. A downside to the writerly teacher is time consumption. (SC)

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The Writerly Teacher

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The day is lost -- something major is missing out of it -- if the whole day passes by without doing writing of some kind. A one-sided handout for a class, done on the word processor, is a neat contribution to one's own backlog of writing. A meditation done for the church, that I can read or distribute to the choir, is another avenue for writing. Every couple of weeks I write an article length piece and sent it off to a newspaper op/ed page. The newspaper gives me a target to send things to. The real objective is to do the writing itself. Doing a review of a play or a movie -- this makes me think creatively about the arts as I experience them.

Then, there are long-term scholarly pieces, like a recently finished one on T. S. Eliot and Alfred North Whitehead, using Whitehead's philosophical ideas to criticize poetry. I long to get entire weekends I can spend on these projects. I write poetry too. I have three organized books of about 100 poems apiece. There are lots of other poems floating around too. A writer needs to do writing in many forms. It's most enjoyable to find something you haven't worked on in a long time, and to put a few new touches onto it. Sometimes something you considered to be bad is actually turned into something pretty good. I also find things done in the past, reread them, and then moan dolefully or scream a great and silent "Ouch!"

Writing frequently and intensely makes me approach the world as a writer. I'm always looking for things to write about. My teaching feeds my writing and my writing feeds my teaching. Conversations about things at the college, things somebody says at lunch or around the coffee pot -- these stay with

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me and I start to write about them. They are about faculty paranoia, or schizoids on the faculty, narcissists we have to deal with, cultural relativism, shared governance, hermeneutics, critical thinking, the logic of the humanities, the humanities change your life, growing up Irish, religion in the twenty-first century, the voucher system -- I have short articles on all of these. I try to get humor and drollery, irony and self-parody, satire or wistfulness into these.

When everything that happens is viewed as grist for writing, you develop a sense of the virtual. The virtual is what could be or might be, rather than what it. A writer writes to be read, and to affect readers in a certain way. Each piece of writing is meant to be taken a certain way, and the angle of intent is sometimes more important than the facts presented. Facts are selected, edited, emphasized, and arranged. Sometimes the angle doesn't come until after you start writing. No fact is just a fact; it is interpreted in some way. Fiction is up front about its virtuality. What is presented is not true, but is like something that is true. But all writing, even non-fiction, is edited in some way to honor a particular point of view.

The flow of writing is different than the flow of speaking. Speaking is in spontaneous contact with events and interactions. Writing is always more constructed. Writing has to sound good after it is written; it has built in editing going on. Writing creates a little world of meaning all of its own, which becomes independent of the real world, even when it is done with an eye to keeping it close to the real world. The writer creates a text which takes on a life of its own, even while being written. From then on, the text

secretes its own world. A piece of writing contains virtual feelings of its own, which may differ somewhat from the actual feelings of the writer.

Writing is a therapy, or it can become one. It is as comforting as an old friend. It constantly helps you discover new things about yourself. It is a habit which takes on a life of its own, and it becomes gratifying just to indulge the habit. Writing can become recreational; part of every fun thing you do is the prospect of writing about it afterward. In writing, you mix up what really did happen and what might have happened. You necessarily select certain details, leave out others, you edit and accommodate, translate and transform. Writing always interprets, shapes, and re-creates whatever experiences it relates. Sometimes, when writing something of deep meaning or touching feeling, I experience myself as a detached craftsman just trying to put the words together carefully.

A teacher who writes is always reflecting on his or her teaching. What worked and what did not work so well? How do I shape my material so that it works better next time? What should I leave out so as not to overwhelm or bore a class? Knowing what to write and how to write it helps us know how to speak and how to shape our words for an audience. We reflect on our communication. Writing helps oral communication, and oral communication provides experience for us to write about. A writerly teachers needs the class as a prospective audience in his or her writing. Writers visualize the audience for which they are writing. One day this visualization may be a class, another day it is a particular student, or a colleague with whom we had a recent discussion.

Writing helps friendship. Collegial relationships are much enriched if we read and comment on each others writing. Friendship in the work place brings energy and commitment that otherwise lies dormant. People come to work in order to continue a dialogue begun with co-workers. Issues unite them; personal and professional lives are mutually enriched. If writing is part of this, colleagues help improve each others written expression. Positive reinforcement and helpful criticism come together as writing is improved. If we can get beyond sharing articles we enjoy to actually sharing our own summaries, class preparations, or position papers, we have become writerly in our teaching.

Writing can be a weapon. If there's something you don't like going on, you can galvanize a group or recruit new people with written material. Writing can be irresponsible, and it can hurt people. When hurting others is necessary, you need to write as surgically as possible, doing a minimum of damage. Write to build bridges, not to tear them down. If you are a writerly person, and there's a story to be told, you are going to tell the story. Writing creates a courage which is all its own. In negative writing, get the facts straight and don't exaggerate. Your readers will exaggerate for you when they get into the fray. Try to give them something solid they can fall back on.

The greatest beneficiary of the writerly teacher is the student. As the student struggles to produce written material, the teacher knows intimately what the writing challenge is all about. The teacher is a role model who can share their own creative stuff in the forms of handouts on class materials, summaries of articles, and responses to ad hoc issues. The teacher who has

overcome bad habits in writing can show students how to do the same. The teacher who has attained confidence in writing, who has benefited from constructive criticism by others, and who always knows the value of one more re-write, is uniquely qualified to advise a student. Students can tell if a teacher likes to write, and the students who have an affinity for it will seek out the teachers who have the same inclination.

A writer has power because a writer is feared. If a group or its members have anything to hide, the writer is a great threat. A perverse enjoyment can come from the painful look of suspicion on the face of an adversary who wonders how much you really know, once you have shown in writing that you know more than they want you to know. A well written article or memo can show up anywhere: on the desk of the dean or president, before the board of trustees, in the local newspaper, in the boxes of your colleagues. All you have to do is address the envelope and your words and opinion are on the way to dance before the eyes of someone who has influence. If it's written well -- it's clear, well-reasoned, moderate and plausible -- then you may find your targets asking for more material or inviting you in for a chat. Don't do it too often -- frequency is for cranks!

Is there a downside to the writerly teacher, a dark underbelly of unmentioned negativity? Alas, of course, there is; this obsession may take psychic prime time away from grading, committee work, and the grunt side of education. Creative people often have something else on their minds that they would rather be doing. The writer can suffer from a lack of focus, or procrastination in doing undesirable tasks. Then there's the question of the photocopiers. Ahem. Even though I have many tabs from Kinko's which I try

to deduct on my teacherly income tax forms, I also put a slight dent in the departmental copying budget. I can't help sharing stuff with colleagues, but I never run off things at school that are not for school consumption! Honest.

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